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***Le Cauchemar de la France:* Blackara's Postcolonial Hip Hop Critique in the City of Light**

J. Griffith Rollefson

*O-Dog c'était le negro le plus barge de la terre. Le cauchemar de l'Amérique: jeune, black et qu'en a rien à branler.*¹

-Menace II Society, 1993 (French Dubbed Version)

It was early April in Paris when I received a reply from the rap duo Blackara in my MySpace inbox. I had met the two MCs, Xiao Venom and Mani Peterson, a week earlier at the studios of *Radio Plurielle* [Pluralist Radio] in Paris's 19th *Arrondissement* where they dropped in to promote an upcoming concert. The community radio station in the ethnically diverse working-class neighborhood of Jaurès featured a weekly hip hop show called *Marché Noir* [Black Market] which showcased the freestyle skills of local “underground” MCs such as Xiao and Mani.² The studio was sparsely decorated and the program's format straightforward. From the control room the show's host, Tarik stood at a mixing board introducing the MCs. Behind him DJ Dirty Swift dropped the beats from his two-turntable and laptop setup. From his position at the board, Tarik looked through a large window into an adjacent live room containing a round table with four microphones and six chairs, twenty or so rappers, one overflowing makeshift ashtray, and an asthmatic looking plant. [see Fig. 1]³ Much like a jazz jam session, the rappers would rotate in and out of the seats to freestyle, some staying longer than others. Xiao and Mani—first-generation Parisians from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Cameroon, respectively—were among the handful of MCs that spent a good deal of time on the mic, effectively promoting themselves.

¹ The original line, untranslated is: “Now O-Dog was the craziest nigga alive. America's nightmare: young, black, and didn't give a fuck.” *Menace II Society*, dir. Albert Hughes (New Line, 1993).

² *Marché Noir* airs every Thursday at Midnight on 106.3 FM, Paris. Previously aired programs, videos, and other information are available at www.marchenoir.biz, last accessed November 12, 2007.

³ All photographs were taken by the author with the permission of subjects.



Fig. 1 - Taping of *Marché Noir* in the Studios of *Radio Plurielle*. Left: Xiao (rapping) and Mani bottom right, upper left; host Tarik at board in control room (in white). Right: DJ Dirty Swift producing live beats for the MCs from the control room.

Over the previous months in Berlin, I had come to count on freestyle sessions as the best points of entry into local hip hop scenes. I attended numerous formal concerts, contacted local recording labels, and checked out the best record stores in each city, but for sheer ease of accessibility and cultivation of contacts nothing could beat a good weekly freestyle session. In her *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, Cheryl Keyes describes such meetings in which “a circle of three or more people” gather to challenge and feed off of one another as “ciphers” (or “ciphaz”).⁴ This was also the preferred nomenclature in Paris, as it was in Berlin and would later prove to be in London. In each of the three cities, such circles formed the basic units of hip hop community. These musical sites contained the most collective knowledge about local scenes and were entry points to information about local artists, upcoming concerts, recording labels, and the best record shops.

In all three cities I found tight knit but fluid, supportive yet competitive communities of rappers that were happy to show an American hip hop fan and researcher the ins and outs of their local music. In each cipher I would come to know a core of rappers that were regulars, returning week after week. Some were mentors, usually slightly older rappers offering advice and challenges to younger MCs and newer

⁴ Cheryl Keyes, *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 124.

arrivals, while others were upstarts, young men with ravenous appetites for freestyle competition. Most ciphers were comprised predominantly of young men from sixteen to thirty with a handful of young women, some of whom would “rock the mic” as well. Stylistically, the makeup of these core groups ranged from the musically stripped down aggression of gangsta rap to the aurally nuanced and expressly political language of “conscious” hip hop.

In all cases, from Paris and Berlin to London, the racial makeup of the ciphers were more diverse than their respective societies, mixing majorities of young men and women of non-European backgrounds together with their peers of European backgrounds to form musical communities. *Marché Noir* was no exception, comprising a diverse assemblage of rappers of post-colonial origins from sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghrib to Southeast Asia. While the musical styles and ideological perspectives varied wildly from MC to MC, the resultant communities shared a notable opposition to their respective national societies, both embodying and voicing the ideas of an alternative public sphere. As I will argue, in making music these young Europeans were also making themselves—formulating their politics, expressing their opinions, and otherwise fashioning their identities in explicit contrast to their cultural mainstreams.

The case of *Marché Noir* serves as just one example of this point. Indeed, the name of the cipher implies opposition, modeling itself as an alternative economy. The radio show is both a “black market” of underground music that is not available in record shops and a black market of marginalized ideas and viewpoints not commonly available in national media debates. Furthermore, it is no mistake that the idea of blackness is central to this construction. Not only does the term “black market” imply the non-transparency of underground economies, it gestures to racial blackness and to the particular black masculinity of hip hop music. As we will see, uses of racialized discourses are central in the musical politics of the rappers with whom I spoke in Paris—“the City of Light.” Thus, I will also argue that as the central form of hip hop culture, music is the key mode of articulating such alternative public spheres and bringing to life the expressive communities that voice the truth of an ethnically diverse Europe. As I will

demonstrate, this mobilization led by European minority youth takes its lead from the ways in which music has served as the key site for African American formulations of cultural and political identity.

As a cipher, the *Marché Noir* radio show was unique to me in the respect that it was held in a radio studio rather than at a concert venue, but both the feel of this artistic community and its function as an artistic outlet and training ground for MCs was identical with the many “live” events that I had attended. Indeed, the most common criticism of such cipher-styled live freestyle concerts is that the participants seem to be performing for themselves and their peers rather than for an audience. Even at larger staged events it was not uncommon for rappers to form a circle, with a number of the rappers literally turning their backs to the audience. In this respect the feel of the freestyle radio format of *Marché Noir* was nearly indistinguishable from the freestyle concert format, as audience feedback came from the gathered crowd of MCs in the studio just as it would in a club. While individual rappers put together lines of verse over DJ Swift’s instrumental beats, MCs at other microphones and throughout the studio would voice their approval by interjecting shouts of “*ouais*” [yeah], echoing quality lyrics, and saying the featured MCs name. Conversely, and less often, they would voice their disapproval by booing, talking to each other, or directly responding to the MC in question when they stepped to the microphone. The effect was that of a community that provided instant feedback, rewarding perceived stylistic or lyrical quality and deriding underdeveloped skills—but all in the context of a shared artistic community.

After the taping of *Marché Noir* I talked to Xiao, Mani, and a number of the other 20 or so MCs who were crammed into the two small rooms comprising the studio. As I had also learned over the previous months in Berlin, the preferred networking apparatus for rappers, DJs, and their promoters was MySpace.com. This held true for Paris as well, as I collected URLs from around the room that would provide a conduit for communication with each individual or group of rappers, in addition to giving me a taste of their recorded music, videos, performance activity, promotional strategies, influences, and often even biographical information. Indeed, such online pages broaden the circle of such freestyle ciphers to include a seemingly limitless network of artists who share information about other upcoming ciphers,

concerts, and recordings. I sent messages to a number of the MCs from *Marché Noir* the following day, and was beginning to examine the music and information on their web pages. At that time Blackara's MySpace page featured two tracks, "Bang Bang" and "Arrivistes" [Go-Getters/Social Climbers], including a video for the latter.⁵ As Xiao and Mani explained to me later, the two tracks were central to their oppositional self-empowerment ideology.

Blackara: *Le Cauchemar de la France*

When I received the reply from Blackara a week later, Xiao left a mobile phone number for me to reach them and indicated they would be free later that night. When I called, Xiao said they could meet me at the Bastille McDonald's in a couple hours. As he explained, their continuing promotion efforts had them flyering in and around the many clubs in the Rue de la Roquette area east of Place de la Bastille and the golden arches provided an easily recognizable sign. I replied that I was happy to meet them there as the apartment that I had found for my stay was not far south of Bastille in the direction of Gare de Lyon. Although I had hoped to find a location in the more diverse 18th, 19th, or 20th *Arrondissements* during my housing search, the location in the central 11th proved handy in its proximity to Rue de la Roquette. As I would later find, the location was also within walking distance of the *Capitale Sale* [Dirty Capital] recording studio operated by Tarik, DJ Swift, and a number of the MCs I had met at *Marché Noir*.

I arrived at the Bastille McDonald's at the appointed hour of 11 pm and after a bit of waiting, walked to the small cinema next door to browse the line up of an upcoming Scorsese festival. Shortly after I had resolved to see *Taxi Driver* the following week, a sunglassed and dapper-looking Mani emerged from a beat-up hatchback and flipped the seat to let me into the back of the two-door. It turned out that the duo had been to the barber earlier in the day in preparation for their upcoming show. Xiao's cut was especially interesting featuring a perfectly rendered argyle design arcing over his head. As I leaned forward between the seats to inquire about our destination, I also realized that both of them were

⁵ Blackara MySpace page, <http://myspace.com/blackara>, last accessed 3 November 2007.

equipped with the custom-fit tooth cap jewelry known in the rap community as “grillz.” They were dressed for hip hop success.

Xiao drove us several blocks east to the Twentyone Sound Bar, a familiar location that DJ Swift had introduced me to a couple weeks prior. The small venue was one of the few bars in Paris that was dedicated to hip hop according to Swift, who holds a regular engagement there. As we got out of the car I inquired about one of Blackara’s tracks that I listened to online. The track featured a number of familiar home studio production values that I had encountered among the underground artists I was interviewing. The beat was something of an aural assault, comprised of a Moog emulator playing an octave-sweeping minor key hook, a parallel motive of electronic blips, and a synthesized trumpet line in a martial staccato style that was fast becoming ubiquitous in underground productions [Ex. 1].

"Bang Bang" Densely Layered Loop

♩ = 60

Electro Bleeps

Sweeping Moog

Martial Trumpets

Snare Bass

(repeat 2x: 1st, 2nd, 4th passes)

(repeat 2x: 3rd pass)

(repeat 2x: on lighter texture)

(repeat 2x: heaviest texture)

Ex. 1 – Transcription of the crunk-styled sonic barrage of the “Bang Bang” loop.

The scene in Paris, I would learn, was currently under the heavy influence of “crunk” an Atlanta-born hip hop subgenre featuring the punchy electronic sounds and drum machine beats of the ubiquitous Roland TR 808—an historically important tool for hip hop producers, especially the West Coast gangsta

rap, or “G-funk” pioneers. Unlike the 1990s gangsta rap producers like Dr. Dre, however, contemporary producers of crunk beats such as Lil Jon and Develop use such digital technologies to layer strident tones one on the other rather than creating the laid back grooves of “G-funk.” Although the dense musical texture of Blackara’s “Bang Bang,” is more akin to crunk, the track includes compositional features of both subgenres, fusing the slow tempo and signature portamento moog gestures of G-funk with crunk’s bright and active snare hits and piercing synthesized timbres.

The vocal delivery of “Bang Bang,” however, establishes the track as explicitly crunk-inspired. The voices of Mani and Xiao are mixed front and center to cut through the bright timbres and crowded musical texture. Furthermore, where G-funk vocals are commonly fluid and easy, crunk vocals are consistently punchy, clipped, or otherwise aggressively delivered. This is the case with the rapping style of the two on all of their recent tracks, which aurally convey a sense of urgency. Finally, the track also includes the loud and diffuse bass tones of both G-funk and crunk, designed for the car cultures of both Southern and West Coast American hip hop scenes. Although Mani and Xiao did not seem to have invested a great deal in their car’s audio system, I would later learn that they were, in fact, interested in such car culture.

More distinctive than the heavy bass gestures in “Bang Bang,” however, is a spoken sample at the outset of the track. “The beginning of ‘Bang Bang’” I asked in my fast improving French as we approached the club, “what’s that sample from?” “*C’est Menace II Society*” came the response from Mani.⁶ “*Le cauchemar de l’Amérique*” [America’s nightmare] he continued, switching to quote the line in English: “young, black...” Xiao joined in, “and don’t give a fuck!”

Blackara’s track “Bang Bang” opens with this line as sampled from the film’s French dubbed version, “*Le cauchemar de l’Amérique: jeune, black et qu’en a rien à branler.*” The line quickly segues into Xiao and Mani rapping “*Blackara, Blackara: Offensive Records,*” an exposition comprising the name

⁶ *Menace II Society*, dir. Albert Hughes.

of their group and the name of their self-run record label.⁷ The sample from the Hughes brothers' 1993 ghetto epic is taken from a voiceover of the main character describing his best friend O-Dog who shoots and kills a Korean storeowner over a disrespectful and paternalistic comment. As I learned in the interview that followed, Xiao and Mani did not consider themselves gangstas, but something resonated with them in this now-famous image of the young black man as America's nightmare. Indeed, by highlighting the sample and declaring themselves "offensive" the two postcolonial subjects purposefully entangle themselves in W. E. B. Du Bois's hundred-year-old question "How does it feel to be a problem?"⁸ The two central Africans making a life for themselves in the colonial center thus declare themselves *France's* nightmare.

In his 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois wrote that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line," but as his work indicates he did not intend for this to be understood as a uniquely American problem. In his 1906 article "The Color Line Belts the World" published in *Collier's Weekly* Du Bois explained how "The Negro problem in America is but a local phase of a world problem."⁹ Indeed, after the landmark *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois became increasingly invested in anticolonial projects, traveling around the world to work with international antiracist movements that linked anti-black racism in the United States with racisms and economic inequities around the world. Nonetheless, the "problem" of race relations was cast as a uniquely American problem over the course of Du Bois's century—the unseemly counterpart to American exceptionalism known the world over. In their appropriation of the "nightmarish" black masculinity of *Menace*, Blackara is referencing this most American of problems to reassert the "local phase" that they are enduring in Paris. But as I demonstrate, in this transaction the example of African American cultural and political struggle has become something

⁷ All translations of lyrics and interviews are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁸ Du Bois, *Souls*, 37.

⁹ Du Bois, "The Color Line Belts the World," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: H. Holt, 1995), 42. See also Robin D. G. Kelley's "'But a Local Phase of a World Problem': Black History's Global Vision 1883-1950," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (Dec. 1999), 1045-1077.

more than just a phase, it has become something iconic and universally assimilable to a degree that the dominant modalities in which blackness are now lived are American ones.

In the introduction to his collection of essays *Small Acts*, Paul Gilroy gestures to this development, including the following observation:

The social memory of the black movements of the 1960s is important for other reasons too. Its creative appropriation marks black Britain's sharp turn away from the Caribbean as its major source of inspiration. Black political culture in this country now looks to African-American history for guidance, pleasure and raw material for its own distinct definitions of blackness. The appeal of the heroic figure of Malcolm X has been central to this development.... It represents the latest triumph of outer-national and intercultural political forms that make their local equivalents, still bolted to the decaying chassis of a nineteenth-century nation-state, look tame, redundant and outmoded by comparison.¹⁰

Although his comments describe the black British context, the motivations and mechanisms that Gilroy points to are today also evident in minority communities—both black and non-black—throughout the West. The American civil rights movement established the dominant paradigm for discourse about race and racism due in no small part to the power of American media and the ability of civil rights leaders and social activists to mobilize those media to serve their ends. As Gilroy argues, the black American identities that grew out of the sixties developed through the black power movement and found guidance in figures like Malcolm X. They also provided alternative structures of feeling to the historically racialized and exclusive concept of the nation-state.

In hip hop we can hear European minorities relating themselves in both style and substance to the African American experience of double consciousness. Both implicitly and explicitly, these expressions of double consciousness share with African Americans the cultural memory of slavery and colonialism and the lived legacy of racial exclusion and oppression. As an artistic movement and popular cultural form, hip hop positions minority life within the context of the nation-state. Yet despite the historical marginalization of black Americans, African American culture—especially music—is undeniably at the core of American culture. Ralph Ellison expresses this point in his 1970 article “What America Would be

¹⁰ Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts* (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1993), 12-13.

like Without Blacks.” His argument, of course, concludes that it would be unrecognizable. Indeed, it would not be America. Ellison writes:

The problem here is that few Americans know who and what they really are. That is why few [white ethnic] groups—or at least few of the children of these groups—have been able to resist the movies, television, baseball, jazz, football, drum-majoretting, rock, comic strips, radio commercials, soap operas, book clubs, slang, or any of a thousand other expressions and carriers of our pluralistic and easily available popular culture. It is here precisely that ethnic resistance is least effective. At this level the melting pot did indeed melt, creating such deceptive metamorphoses and blending of identities, values and lifestyles that most American whites are culturally part Negro American without even realizing it...

Despite his racial difference and social status, something indisputably American about Negroes not only raised doubts about the white man’s value system, but aroused the troubling suspicion that whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black. Materially, psychologically and culturally, part of the nation’s heritage is Negro American and whatever it becomes will be shaped in part by the Negro’s presence.¹¹

Ellison reminds us of the fact that the African American is constitutive of the American, and yet is commonly subjected to erasure in national and international discussions. Following Ellison, I suggest that the parenthetical construction of “(African) Americanization” might help to draw out and highlight the centrality of African American culture to American culture while simultaneously speaking to the marginalizations and erasures at play. To use W. E. B. Du Bois’s noted metaphor of double consciousness, the parentheses in this figure are “the veil.”

Read in tandem with Ralph Ellison’s thoughts on the inherent hybridity of American culture in his “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” Gilroy’s above thoughts provide an evocative political corollary. The (African) American example has provided both Ellison’s irresistibly “pluralistic and easily available popular culture” as well as Gilroy’s triumphant “intercultural political forms” that together guide today’s minority identity politics across the Western world. Historically, popular music has been the key to crafting and expressing these political forms among African Americans. Fittingly, in today’s demographically changed Europe, African American music is increasingly the key to developing new intercultural political forms.

¹¹ Ralph Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” *Time Magazine* (6 April 1970).

Blackara: *Les “Arrivistes”*

When I sat down with Xiao and Mani at the Twentyone Sound Bar one of my first questions was about the name “Blackara,” which seemed to articulate an African American perspective through the use of the English term “black.” Indeed, such a word choice eschews francophone articulations of African diasporic identity, most notably the “*Négritude*” movement promoted by intellectuals such as Léopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire. Instead, Mani explained that the name reflected a “pro-black” agenda, while the suffix “ara” referenced gold “like 18 karat or 24 karat” he said pulling his chain from his chest. “Blackara shines! It has to be real. If you want diamonds and gold, you’ve got to work. If you sleep, you get fake gold and fake diamonds.” “By any way necessary,” added Xiao in English. As Gilroy indicates, Malcolm X remains a heroic figure for blacks in the English-speaking world and a powerful signifier of African American struggle, but here we see the global reach of Malcolm’s words and of African American political culture writ large. Xiao’s shorthand reference to Malcolm’s politics easily conveyed his meaning to his American interviewer and cleared the way towards an understanding of Blackara’s particular cultural politics.

As their explanation of the name indicated, Blackara’s politics is expressed through the articulation of blackness and the symbol of gold.¹² For them, gold has a deep meaning that represents the material results of hard work and self-reliance. In their formulation of the name Blackara, Xiao and Mani are also expressing a postcolonial perspective on the exploitation of Africa’s natural resources—most notably the continent’s once rich gold reserves which were mined and exported back to Europe’s colonizing nations.¹³ In the symbol of African gold, the two thus establish a diasporic link to Africa as well as a motivating force for themselves in Paris. Importantly, for Xiao and Mani this motivating factor is not couched in terms of reparations for colonial exploitation, but viewed as both a means and an end.

¹² For an account of the symbolic weight of gold in South African hip hop see: Gavin Steingo, “The Politicization of Kwaito: From the ‘Party Politic’ to Party Politics,” *Black Music Research Journal* 27, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 23-44.

¹³ Countless colonial and postcolonial scholars have examined this process, most notably Walter Rodney in his *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1982).

Expanding on the central concept of their track “*Arrivistes*” [Go Getters/Social Climbers], Xiao and Mani described their goals of material improvement and self-reliance in Paris as follows:

Xiao: Here it is not possible for us to succeed [*arrive*]. People always tell us: “you cannot.” But we’ve got to make it by any way, because there is no way for us. There is no way. Because the life we are living is not a vacation. When you go back home and you see your mother and father in trouble—you know if you don’t do something now, it’s going to be you at home with trouble.

Mani: And you know in France people always say: “yeah, there’s some help.” You know for hospital and everything. There’s a lot of help, of course, but it’s a way for the government to know you and to keep you down. When you aren’t working you earn—maybe about 700 euros [per month]. You know? And when you work, you’re up every morning you earn about 1000.

Xiao: Or more.

Mani: More, but you’re working. So people always think, okay I’ll sleep and I’ll take my money, but it’s the new...

Xiao: Chains. The new slavery.

Mani: The new slavery. Because you have to say: “give me, give me, give me.” It’s why in France it’s more difficult to blow up [achieve success], to blow up for real... You know, because the government, they keep you down. Giving you food. Feeding you. So you cannot be intelligent here. In the United States they say you are rich or you are poor. There are two ways. Here they make you think you can do anything you want. But really you cannot do anything when you go somewhere and people see you’re black. Of course there’s not racism everywhere, everywhere, everywhere...

Xiao: No KKK here...

Mani: But the real problem is when you go out and you see the world is not like you’re living in the ‘hood.

It is clear that the two do not fully idealize the United States, but a pronounced free market logic underscores their critique of the French welfare state. In their view of the French social safety net as new form of slavery, Xiao and Mani express a nuanced view that critiques welfare as a method of keeping black Parisians in a hand to mouth cycle of poverty. In addressing the symptoms of poverty rather than the causes—racism and lack of economic opportunity—they view French policies as ways to keep black Parisians dependent. Demonstrating a novel, if under-informed view of U.S. policy, Mani suggests that at least in the U.S. the government will not pretend to take care of you.

When I later asked them about the upcoming presidential election touted as the most important in a generation, the two responded that they are no more impressed with the Socialist Party’s Ségolène Royal than with the conservative free-marketeer Nicolas Sarkozy. They explained:

Mani: Me I can vote, so I'm gonna vote. But really... Sarko is gonna do things for his friends and Ségolène for her friends, and everybody's got friends, but it's not for us really. But remember, they are all friends.

Xiao: The shit is for them not for us. They keep the poor poor. We think the real thing is that they have the money and the power—and the people, we're fighting for respect.

Mani: I make my money. I make my things. We make ours.

Xiao: If you don't teach something to us we're going to take it. We have to take it. Life is like this: if you are waiting for the sky to give you bread you're gonna die.

Mani: You're gonna die. We prefer dying trying to get rich.

In addition to harboring a distrust of the political class at large, they went on to describe in detail their distrust of Royal because of her paternalistic politics and “Sarko” because of his racism. Interestingly, however, their own economic politics echoed those of the latter; the pro-business “Americanizer” who would soon be elected president. Notably, their comments also reference the American gangsta rapper 50 Cent's 2003 album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*.¹⁴ As we will see, the reference was likely intended.

Mani and Xiao, it turned out, grew up not far from the studios of *Radio Plurielle* in the neighborhood between Jaurès and Stalingrad Metro stations. The area in the northwest corner of Paris, in which the two still live, is home to some of the largest housing projects (known as *cités*) within the city proper and is also one of the most ethnically diverse quarters. Together, Mani and Xiao recounted a story about asking for financial assistance from the city for a block party that they were organizing. The tale served as a sort of Genesis story of their current worldview.

Mani: We don't wait for our people. Because we have had some problems. In the 'hood in Jaurès there is no organization to help the young and the old.

Xiao: The youngsters, they're on the street, you know, and they can be hit by a car any time, and no one does anything. So a long time ago we went to see the mayor and he said that...

Mani: In his office...

Xiao: and he said that in our 'hood there are not enough problems, so I cannot help you. I said okay. So after that we decided to make our money by any means necessary—in good ways, bad ways, we don't give a fuck. Because, our people deserve to be happy. So with this money we organized a 'hood party for the young and the old. For all the people: black, white, Arab, everybody. And then later the mayor said to us, oh we can do this together and we said “no!”

Mani: We can do it on our own.

Xiao: Because when we came to you, you said “fuck you” so don't come to us now. Because now we are independent. So, a kind of power. We can do something for the

¹⁴ 50 Cent, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (Interscope 2003).

people. The people believe in us. And we got the solution for the whole problem. Mani: We'll make our money and after we have our party we'll live on our own. It's like in the film *The Village*. Our 'hood is a village. The village is closed and there are monsters, but in the village everything is good. It's how we live. We've got our own course and way of life. And we say to everybody, we speak for you telling you to keep your own people. We keep ours. And after everybody is the same we can be really linked.

Mani's analogy to *The Village* proved to be a reference to M. Night Shyamalan's 2004 thriller about a small town insulating itself against modernity by creating a myth about monsters in the woods surrounding them.¹⁵ Although he had earlier compared Sarkozy to Hitler (and George W. Bush), his point did not concern monsters, but rather the vision of self-reliance he had for his community. As Mani had noted earlier, he sees the main problem as the imbalance between life in his economically depressed and ethnically diverse 'hood, and life in Paris's extremely wealthy and expensive city center. Additionally, his point of reference again turned out to be an artifact of American popular culture. While there were many cases in which the two searched for metaphors that might better convey their meanings to an American researcher with imperfect French skills, the case of Mani's reference to *The Village* was quite clearly pre-conceptualized as something that resonated with him regarding this exact point.

The hopeful gesture of solidarity that Mani closes with here is also reminiscent of Du Bois's 1897 entreaty for African Americans "to maintain their race identity until the mission of the Negro people is accomplished, and the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility."¹⁶ Indeed, his statement that "after everybody is the same we can be really linked," while grounded in the language of self-determination, is a very clear statement for equality through difference rather than assimilation. Although Xiao is clear about the multiethnic inclusiveness of their project, their larger message and a second nod to Malcolm X makes manifest the explicit linkages between their political project and African American oppositional models.

¹⁵ *The Village*, dir. M. Night Shyamalan (Touchstone, 2004).

¹⁶ Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, 237.

Xiao further explained the self-empowering “*Arriviste*” ideology as an individualizing one, displayed through the gold on their necks, the jewelry in their mouths, the “Blackara” tattoos on both of their forearms, and the patterns in his hair [Fig. 2]. The two even have signature “hooks,” that appear in every track. Xiao’s is a call of “Xiao i-ci!” [Xiao here!], with an emphasis on the second syllable of the word and Mani’s is a quasi-Latino call of “aye, aye, *aye!*,” again with the emphasis on the final syllable.



Fig. 2 – “Les Arrivistes” – Xiao and Mani exhibiting their “personalized” styles.

As he pointed to his personalized and consciously ostentatious markers of success and conspicuous consumption Xiao explained:

Like we say in “*Arrivistes*”: “personalized for your personality” [*personalisé pour sa personnalité*]. It means we have our own customized character. Because today in France everybody wants to look like everybody else. But we don’t want to be just anybody we want to be somebody. You know? So we have to be personalized, custom. We like to show off our jewels, our hairstyle. You see: “personalized,” because when you see us you know: “ah, that is Blackara.”

As Xiao and Mani explained, they take a great deal of pride in community and yet seek to express a strong sense of individuality within that sphere. Further, they are working towards the goal of a better-integrated and more equitable society but remain opposed to the assimilationist and paternalistic welfare policies of the Socialist party, dismissing socialist activists as “sheep.” On the flip side, although they are sworn enemies of Nikolas Sarkozy, Blackara’s neo-liberal politics closely parallel his. Blackara’s *Arriviste* ideology thus seems wholly unexpected if not paradoxical.

On the track “Bang Bang,” Xiao gives musical voice to these signifiers of individuality and work, when he raps the lines:

*Nous grande pointure, gros bonnet / Les boss c’est nous
Faut pas que tu te trompes / Grande voiture, gros bijoux
Rajoute des crômes / C’est sur une pyramide de MCs que le blackara trône*

[Our baggy clothes, fat caps / We are the boss
Make no mistake about it / Big car, big jewels
Covered in chrome / Atop a pyramid of MCs sits Blackara’s throne]¹⁷

Although such lyrics are easily dismissed as effects of the worldwide spread of American consumer culture and the influence of commercial hip hop’s increasingly “bling”-focused lyrics, we must also take into consideration Mani’s point that: “the real problem is when you go out and you see the world is not like you’re living in the ‘hood.” Indeed, critiques of conspicuous consumption are most commonly directed not at wealthy consumers of *haute couture* but at the social climbers that Blackara fashion themselves. While few of the underground rappers that I spoke with in Paris held Blackara’s explicit *Get Rich or Die Tryin’* mentality, the logic of their ideology was striking.

In addition to the bling imagery of “Bang Bang,” the track also expresses an oppositional anger couched in terms of their neighborhood’s “soldiers” and their “enemies.” Supporting the track’s violent title, both the beat and the lyrics are delivered in an aggressively hypermasculine and “raw” manner throughout. As described above, the high vocal mix is designed to match the intensity of the heavily layered texture of sweeping moog lines and martial trumpets over a relentless drum track [Ex. 1].

¹⁷ Blackara, “Bang Bang,” Myspace.com/blackara. Last accessed 15 September 2008.

Through the use of vocal overdubs, the texture of Xiao's baritone voice grows thick in the above stanza, and is positioned prominently in the mix. The imperfect matching of vocal takes in the overdubbing also creates a level of tension as the rapper gasps for air at unequal intervals. As such, the track crafts an underground aesthetic of struggle that implies the earned reward of such material wealth. And despite the low-fidelity production values and bling subject matter of "Bang Bang," the poetic structure is quite elegant with rhyme schemes emerging not only at the end of lines (*nous/bijoux, crômes/trône*), but also across lines (*pointure/voiture*) and with internal assonances (*nous grande pointure*).

The video for "Arrivistes" is a visual representation of the track's message and embodies many of the themes that arose in the interview. Yet, it also raises a number of questions about what their ideology of uplift looks like in practice. It begins with a shot of Mani on the street, transacting some sort of deal with another young man. Indeed, the opening image suggests another translation of *arrivistes* as "hustlers." The word is, of course, commonly associated with drug dealing and other illegal business in the hip hop lexicon, but the "by any means necessary" ideology that Blackara espouses flips the value judgment on its head, arguing that their entrepreneurial spirit in unregulated markets will be rewarded. In the scene that follows, their discussion of welfare as the "new slavery" is narrativized as Mani calls Xiao to rouse him out of bed and out of inaction. Xiao's cell phone rings with the lush strings of the opening phrase of Nino Rota's *Theme from The Godfather*—a clear gesture to Blackara's valorization of organized crime, here symbolized by the famous Italian American social climbers. Xiao answers and Mani tells him to wake up because they have to meet Mac Manu, a female vocalist who will perform the chorus for the track. Xiao gets up from bed to attend to his business of underground hip hop production, and the video begins in earnest.

The body of the video reads like a catalog of American rap video conventions. The first scene establishes their neighborhood, depicting Blackara and guest artist Mac Manu beneath the platform of their home Jaurés Metro station. In one shot, Xiao lifts his trademark gold medallion from his neck and the next tight shot focuses on Mani's gold-filled mouth. As Mani rhymes that he is an expert in the

“parallel economies” of the black market, we see images of high stakes hustler life borrowed from Hollywood cinematic conventions. Closely emulating the visual grammar of crime films, Mani descends into a parking garage to conduct a transaction—presumably a drug deal—sliding a briefcase to a business associate or rival hustler. From these opening images Blackara fashions a criminal authenticity that provides the logic for the *arriviste* images of wealth in the scenes that follow.

The English cognate of the term “*arriviste*” is of course, “arrive,” and in the next section of the video the three literally arrive at a posh dance club in a large, albeit older model American car. Reflecting their knowledge of and engagement with U.S. hip hop car culture, we see a customized white Chrysler Le Baron roll up in front of the “Jet Club” with the name Blackara on the grill and their initials, XV and MP on the sides. The scene inside the club presents the three in a VIP lounge with a group of friends, many of whom are scantily clad women. The VIP scene—established by the visual markers of red walls and dancing women—thus serves as an arrival in terms of wealth and prestige. It is the presumed goal of the high stakes transactions and “hard work” in the previous tableau.

With the first iteration of the chorus, the VIP scene also serves to demarcate a musical arrival. Although the primary musical loop is constant throughout the track’s verses and chorus, it also has a highly teleological trajectory that reinforces the narrative of both the lyrics of the song and the images of the video. Indeed, the melodic shape of the line of continuous sixteenth notes is that of a countdown, outlining a falling natural minor scale with a lowered second degree [Ex. 2].



Ex. 2 – Descending natural minor scale with lowered 2nd scale degree.

Although the tonal goal of E-flat is constantly reinforced on every beat, the gesture is nonetheless one of impending doom. The loop resonates with the narrative of Mani's high stakes criminality as the lowered second acts an especially powerful musical signifier of proximity to danger.¹⁸ The falling gesture resonates with Mani's descent into the dark parking garage and its F-flat conveys the danger of this type of descent. Indeed, where a leading tone on ascent is pleasing in a functionally tonal setting, this type of leading tone on descent is fundamentally upsetting despite its established inevitability in this Phrygian modal environment. The musical and narrative message here seems to invert this pleasure/displeasure binary, however, as Mani and Xiao take pride in their stated ability to *arrive* in desperate circumstances—to step up and succeed in turning such situations to their financial advantage.

Over the continuing loop, Blackara's vocalist Mac Manu sings the track's chorus of: "*Les Arrivistes... Personnalisé pour sa personnalité*" in a Jamaican dancehall idiom of rapidly repeated eighth notes on E-flat, with interjections of major seconds and minor thirds at structurally important points. While the half-sung half-spoken idiom is not especially common in Parisian hip hop, the musical connections between hip hop and dancehall are historically well established and very active in other scenes, including London's heavily Caribbean influenced scene.

In the verse that follows, Xiao plays a pimp rather than a dealer. Set somewhat awkwardly in a McDonalds, we see Xiao sitting in a booth between two women. After establishing his power of attraction in the verse's opening lyrics, he points to his personalized style as the source of his prowess. Here, his signature argyle hairstyle is mirrored on the hood of a red sweatshirt and matching pants, yielding a striking visual effect. In the main dramatic device of the scene, we see him imagine himself as something other than an attractive and customized ladies man. In a brief dream sequence we see him in a conservative sweater and khakis with a primly dressed woman on his arm. Notably, while the woman in the dream sequence is dressed conservatively in a black sweater and plaid skirt, the women in the booth

¹⁸ John Williams *Theme to Jaws* is, of course, the most remarked upon example of this most simple of musical signifiers.

are dressed in revealing red and leopard print dresses. Furthermore, the conservatively dressed woman is white, while the women in the booth are black. This moment of racialized difference is quickly injected with misogynistic overtones as well, as Xiao makes one of the women in the booth take a note to the white woman, instructing her to call him. In the end, the scene serves to establish Xiao's power over all of the women, simultaneously characterizing him as a pimp and objectifying all three of the women as prostitutes—or “hos” in gangsta rap parlance. Rather than joining mainstream society—as portrayed in the dream sequence—Xiao's character endeavors to bring the mainstream (white) woman into his world. After the verse is complete, the chorus and its VIP lounge scene resumes, now with the added implication that all of the women there are prostitutes.

Through the two fictionalized scenarios of Mani as drug dealer and Xiao as pimp, Blackara completes the narrative that crime does pay. Although Mac Manu sets herself apart from the rest of the women by wearing even more gold than Mani and Xiao, the remainder of the video features objectifying close-ups of dancing women. Indeed, the chasm between the self-empowering *arriviste* ideals that Xiao and Mani described and the debased narrative with which they chose to illustrate this ideology is wide. Where the mantra of “by any means necessary” rang true as a response to structural racism and economic inequality in our interview, the video for “*Arrivistes*” threw cold water on their righteous indignation.

In his article, “The Cosmopolitan Nativist: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and the Antinomies of Postcolonial Modernity” Tejumola Olaniyan describes another musician's ideological paradoxes as indicative of a wider postcolonial dilemma.¹⁹ Olaniyan illustrates how the father of Afro-Beat music, the Nigerian Fela Kuti, matched a cultural traditionalism replete with separatist politics to a musical style that drew on global popular culture, arguing that the disjunctures of postcoloniality make such antinomies possible, if not necessary. In brief, the collision of first and third worlds on the same soil and in the same minds has brought about a new paradoxical system in which rational ideals such as universalism and

¹⁹ Tejumola Olaniyan, “The Cosmopolitan Nativist: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and the Antinomies of Postcolonial Modernity,” *Research in African Literatures* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 76-89.

equality are challenged by the manifestly illogical realities of white supremacy and structural racism. As such, the argument closely parallels the mental two-ness of Du Bois's "double consciousness."

While Olaniyan's primary consideration is of the antinomies of Euro-American cosmopolitanism and African tradition, he also interrogates the unexpected misogyny of Fela's otherwise liberating cultural politics. Indeed, the antinomy is heightened in light of the fact that the bandleader's mother was at the forefront of African women's movements. Olaniyan theorizes these antinomies through the figure of a "cosmopolitan nativist," who "borrows tools from wherever in defense of African ways of knowing and being conceived as embattled by Euro-American cultural imperialism. In this conception, postcolonial musical modernity, indeed postcolonial modernity, is best theorized as an aporia pulling together two apparently contradictory paradigms."²⁰

Though I will not attempt to offer an apology for Blackara's sexism—or criminal behavior, for that matter—we might follow Olaniyan's lead in working towards an understanding thereof. We have in the video's figure of the conservatively dressed white woman, an image of white European normativity. Though he does not explicitly espouse sexism, here we see Xiao militating against his stated enemy—white normativity—but doing so in a sexist mode. As a widely available, if destructive, way to feel empowered, the sexist discourses and actions of the video function as "tools" with which to do violence against a straw man for class and race discrimination in France, albeit a manifestly misguided one.

In his book-length study of Fela, *Arrest the Music*, Olaniyan describes the genesis of Fela's mature ideology as the result of his exposure to the Black Power movement while working with musicians in the United States in the late 1960s. Therein he writes of the "radicalizing effect of the ten-month U.S. trip on Fela... which forcefully catalyzed and definitively shaped" his "cultural nationalism."²¹ While the early Black Power movement was characterized by a relatively positive record of gender equality and women's empowerment, many ideas that have filtered down to hip hop in the

²⁰ Olaniyan, "The Cosmopolitan Nativist," 77.

²¹ Tejumola Olaniyan, *Arrest the Music: Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 25.

intervening years have sustained certain liberating aspects, while subverting others. The case of Public Enemy is instructive as a widely cited example of the politically liberating potential of black power influenced hip hop. However, in order to make celebratory claims about the seminal group, critics are forced to downplay or all together write out their sometimes violently antisemitic views. As their music and video illustrate, Blackara has found in the expressive culture and media of American hip hop a deep legacy of black cultural pride and self-reliance on which to draw, but they have also fallen into many of the same traps as African American artists.

The Resonance of Africa and Community Memory

Later in the interview, I asked Xiao and Mani if they had a strong connection to Africa. Xiao responded: “Yes, it is natural, it’s an obligation. Because we are Africans. When you turn on the TV and you see something about Africa—it touches us. We see our family in Africa. And in our community [in Jaurés] they speak my language.” Xiao went on to explain that they were both first generation immigrants having arrived in Paris as infants. Mani was born in Cameroon and he in “Zaire, Congo...” adding “where Muhammad Ali beat George Foreman.” The reference to the famed “Rumble in the Jungle” was likely intended to help orient me to his place of origin, but it was also spoken with a great deal of pride. The momentous boxing match was promoted by Don King and Zaire’s strongman president Mobutu as a pan-Africanist event imbued with an air of black power at the height of the movement. Of course, the fight also featured the Nation of Islam’s highest profile member, an associate of Malcolm X and another prominent symbol of the black power movement—Ali.

When I asked the two for their takes on the legacy of colonialism in France and in Africa, the first response came from Xiao, who explained with conviction:

The problem is that people forget *everything*. That’s the problem. We have got to have *memory*. It’s what kills black people, you know? The memory. When we went to school they taught us about a lot of important things, really important things. But you have to speak to me about my history, what you have done to my people.

The words echo those of countless African Americans confronted with curricula in which black history is relegated to a special case (and month) and otherwise marginalized. They also share a commonly used discourse in American rap lyrics, including a particularly poignant line from the New York hip hop group De La Soul: “I make you feel lost like high school history.”²²

In a mocking tone, Mani continued on the point, explaining that in Parisian classrooms they teach colonialism saying: “Maybe some people have done bad things but we went over there to do good things. We taught you to eat with a spoon!” They continued:

Xiao: In education, the government has a law that you have to teach about the good side of colonization.

Mani: That is really shit! And you can’t speak back to the teacher. So: “okay, okay, okay okay.” But afterwards you look to your continent, to your country, and you say “look they speak that language in that part of the country, and here is another country, but they speak the same.” Who cut—who made it that way? It’s colonialism.

Xiao: And they just say they taught you how to eat with a spoon!

Mani: Look I have a pen!

Mani’s point about social memory and the shortcomings of their school’s African history curriculum was clearly an important one for him, as he kept returning to memory as a theme throughout the interview. Indeed, the symbol of gold served as a reclamation of African natural resources for which colonizers “gave us some guns, some drugs, and cigarettes.” This sentiment is dramatized in a postcolonial revenge scene at the end of Blackara’s track “Bang Bang.” After giving shout outs (a list of thank yous) to a number of their friends, their neighborhood of Jaurès, and their 19th *Arrondissement* with calls of “Bang Bang,” they lower their figurative saluting guns from the sky to the colonizer, closing the track with the line: “*Général colonial: bang, bang, bang, bang*” [Colonial general: bang, bang, bang, bang].

As Blackara’s responses indicate, the two were genuinely engaged in postcolonial, national, and international politics and the histories thereof. However, when I asked what their school had taught about Francophone intellectuals such as the Martinicans Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, and the Senegalese

²² De La Soul, “In the Woods” on *Buhlooni Mind State* (Rhino 1993).

Léopold Senghor, they shrugged off the question. Whether through disinterest or because the anticolonial leaders were not taught in their school curricula, Mani and Xiao found their resources for postcolonial opposition and self-improvement elsewhere. Like Fela before them it was the African American models of black power and self-reliance that provided the most puissant models of black identity and community solidarity. Furthermore, through their engagement with, and reference to, elements of American popular culture it became clear that electronic media were central to both imagining their worlds and themselves. Indeed, the gangsta rap narrative and commercialized images of the “*Arrivistes*” video seemed to confirm this influence. For better and for worse, hip hop music in particular provided the primary way to formalize their ideas, represent themselves, and achieve their goals.

When I asked the two how they make musical choices on their tracks, Xiao described their compositional process as follows:

It’s like a story. It’s why for us, you can’t use our lyrics, you know, to make a shaker (a simple dance track). There’s a lot of people who can make a shaker of a song. But it’s the same song. Always the same song. In our songs we have to say something. Maybe it’s about parties, maybe drugs, maybe music, maybe problems, maybe about our parents, maybe about history, maybe about school, but we say something from the beginning to the end of all our lyrics.

When I followed up, pressing them about the actual musical processes of crafting a beat, Mani said that they produced the beats on a computer at home but returned to the same point, finding himself at a loss for words: “It depends on the track. If it is about something sad, then we have sad music; something serious, serious music; something fun, party music. But we always say something.”

For Blackara the sonic elements of their tracks were foremost a vehicle for the communication of lyrics, ideas, and feelings. As Ingrid Monson describes in her *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, the jazz tradition is part of an “aural legacy” of African American tradition that has historically employed such musical communication as a form of cultural memory.²³ Musical storytelling has been an especially useful vessel for both establishing dialogue and sustaining and developing

²³ Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.

traditions and memories. Just as Xiao and Mani note that their instrumental tracks must establish the tone for their rhymes to have meaning and power, Monson writes of the fundamental importance of the rhythm section for the jazz soloist at the outset of her study:

An imaginative rhythm section can inspire a soloist to project his or her most vibrant voice, while disinterested accompaniment can thwart even the strongest artist... When a musician successfully reaches a discerning audience, moves its members to applaud or shout praises, raises the energy to dramatic proportions, and leaves a sonorous memory that lingers long after, he or she has moved beyond technical competence, beyond the chord changes, and into the realm of “saying something.”²⁴

To be sure, in hip hop the live freestyle cipher format more closely echoes the improvisational interaction of jazz soloist and rhythm section. Countless MCs at freestyle ciphers have indicated to me that when the DJ’s beats are not just right it is impossible to establish a “flow,” either stylistically, musically, or lyrically. Blackara’s emphasis on the importance of the musical context in the studio, however, conveys the idea that without a good beat the lyrical delivery will not only keep them from flowing, but that without an appropriate musical feel their ideas will certainly fall on deaf ears. In the context of their remarks about their community in Jaurés, it is clear that Xiao and Mani are interested not only in speaking, but in communicating ideas or feelings to a receptive audience. In their view, if nothing is communicated, nothing is said. As such, the act of “saying something” is more akin to dialogue than monologue. Despite their highly individualizing lyrics there is thus an idea about hip hop as communication, community building, and empowerment.

At the end of our interview Xiao pointed out the t-shirt that he had designed for their record label, Offensive Records. It represented another “personalized” affect that he was wearing for their promotional activities, and was in this case a truly personal and powerful one, which he was especially proud of. [see Fig. 3]

²⁴ Monson, *Saying Something*, 1-2.



Fig. 3 – Xiao’s design for the Offensive Records t-shirt: “They Do Not Know Who We Are.”

The poetry, beginning on the shirt’s back, is his own and reads:

For THEM I am:
 less than nothing,
 a robber, lazy,
 a delinquent, a savage,
 an outcast, a coward,
 a prisoner, the bad guy,
 an ignoramus, an imbecile,
 a problem, a good for nothing,
 a MODERN SLAVE
 But when I look at myself in my mirror, I see:
 a father, a son, a brother,
 a fighter, a genius,
 the future, a go-getter,
 a hard worker, a thinker,
 a visionary,
 A FREE MAN.
 THEY judge us but...

Xiao then pointed out how the final ellipsis on the shirt’s back leads to the front, which reads in much larger letters: “They do not know who we are.” The list of stereotypes, including “a delinquent,” “the bad guy,” and “a problem,” echoes the dubbed *Menace II Society* sample that begins the track “Bang Bang.”

What's more, the translated quote from *Menace* that serves as my epigram above, provides a social translation for Xiao and Mani as well, in effect saying: we are *le cauchemar de la France*—France's nightmare. The “we” that he is speaking both to and for is his racially diverse and economically marginalized postcolonial community in Paris's 19th *Arrondissement*. As Blackara communicates through their *Arriviste* ideology, their eschewal of French patrimony and paternalism, and their sense of community self-determination in Jaurés, they have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

***Capitale Sale* Records and Sidi-O**

After first meeting DJ Dirty Swift and Tarik at the *Marché Noir* radio show, they invited me to *Vingt-Quatre Heures* [twenty four hours] Studio, the home of their record label *Capitale Sale* [Dirty Capital]. Along with the studios at *Radio Plurielle*, the small studio on Rue du Pasteur Wagner just north of Place de la Bastille would come to be an important location to meet and interview other Parisian MCs. The studio is comprised of a small storefront office space and two barrel vaulted cellars. The main floor serves as the office for *Capitale Sale*, with just enough room for a couch and a solitary desk piled high with CDs and promotional materials. The two downstairs rooms were filled with computers, synthesizers, and other recording equipment. At the end of each was a small soundproofed recording booth, outfitted with a single microphone and set of headphones. The only other notable feature of the independent, and literally underground studio, were the hundreds of LPs stacked on chairs, in crates, on desks, and in unruly piles on the floor. [Fig. 4]

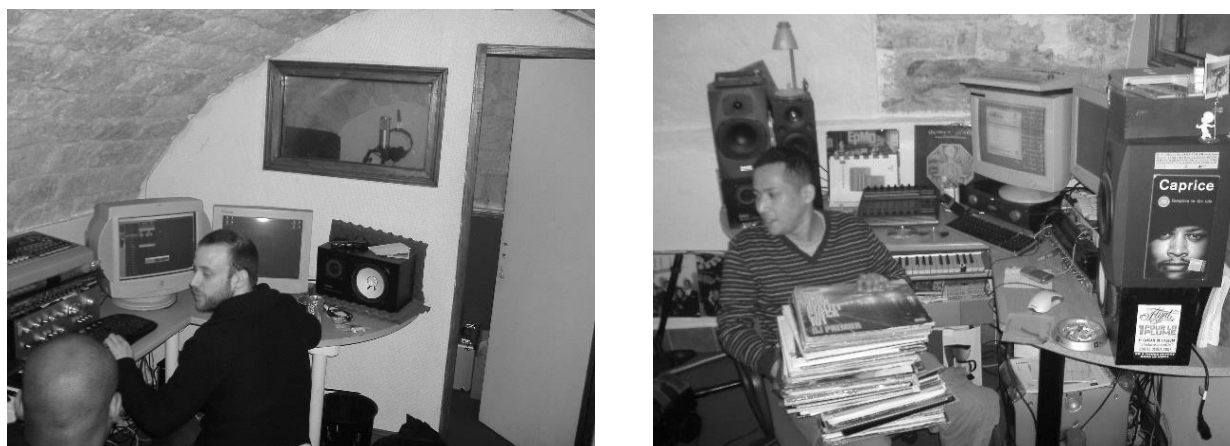


Fig. 4 – Left: Wira and Greg “The Greek” in studio one with sound booth at rear. Right: Boramy in studio two with a stack of LPs.

A quick glance at the top of the stacks yielded classic titles from the rap group EPMD and DJ Premiere, to classics of African American soul such as James Ingram and Quincy Jones, to the disco group CHIC, a favorite sampling source for early hip hop producers. The studio was a veritable library of African American music from R&B to hip hop—no doubt the result of a dozen or so DJs using the studio as a storage facility for the albums that were currently out of their regular rotation. Furthermore, with the advent of digital Serato “Scratch Live” turntable software, the records were coming to be used less often, as DJs converted their music libraries to mp3 and stored them on their laptops. DJ Dirty Swift, one of my primary contacts in Paris, was one who had recently made a full transition to the Serato set up. As he explained, while analog LPs were still used in the studio for their higher quality, warmth, and character, the digital setup was just too easy to pass up for club gigs. Where DJs were once required to tote an entire crate of LPs to each event and have some semblance of a plan, the Serato technology allowed them to be more responsive to the crowd or to freestyling MCs, changing direction at a moment’s notice with their entire library at hand.

As the DJ for the *Marché Noir* show, Swift introduced me to countless MCs, including Wira, Boramy, Khosa, Taïro, and a number of others who recorded for *Capitale Sale* or rented out the studio space. In addition, he introduced me to one of the producers for the label, Greg “le Grec” [The Greek],

whose production company Quantizers composed and mastered most of the tracks that were issued on *Capitale Sale* recordings. Greg and Wira showed me around the studio, commenting that although much of the technology was not cutting edge, they could consistently issue commercial quality recordings to be distributed nationally, because they had the real talent. Indeed, the computers and the Roland sampling keyboard were older models, but I later found that *Capitale Sale* CDs were available for purchase in both the small independent and large chain record stores across Paris. There are a number of reasons for the wide distribution for small labels in France, including radio quotas for French music and a thriving market for hip hop. The example of *Capitale Sale*'s success was nonetheless remarkable and made the impact of these larger market and regulation issues quite apparent.

During my time in Paris, the label was busy promoting their most recent release, a CD by Sidi-O entitled "*Extrait d'Amertume*" [Extract of Bitterness]. I spoke with the Algerian Parisian rapper briefly at a café near the studios. He explained that his name combined "Sidi," the Arab word for king, with his own first initial—O for Omar. Hence, the rapper went by Sidi-O or King Omar. As we spoke, I was struck by the rapper's quiet demeanor, which was further highlighted by a slight lisp. He told me that he was from the 18th *arrondissement* near Stalingrad Metro station. Indeed, it turned out that like Xiao and Mani, many of the label's artists were from the Northeast of Paris. Sidi-O explained that despite the travel time, the location for the studio was chosen for its centrality. The rent was thus higher than similar spaces in the 18th or 19th, but the studio was run like something of a timeshare with MCs, DJs, and producers contributing to the rent by purchasing studio time or otherwise investing in the shared aims of the label. Like the *Marché Noir* show at *Radio Plurielle*, *Capitale Sale* was something of a communal meeting place for the hip hop musicians and their friends. During the thirty minutes of our interview, a number of other *Capitale Sale* musicians came and left the café saying hello to Sidi-O, palling around with the establishment's proprietor, and heading back to their projects in the studio with renewed vigor.

When I asked Sidi-O about his new album, he explained: "The title is a metaphor for how experiences of life can build up, and bitterness can build up. So I take the shit, I take the bitterness and I

refine it and put it into my texts.” The title track is an extended metaphor on this theme of refining the bitterness of life into lessons that can then be applied as healing essential oils to others’ heads. Its chorus begins with a forcefully delivered statement that captures the pressure of the metaphor: “*extrait d’amertume a serré de ma tête*” [extract of bitterness is squeezed from my head]. Indeed, the power with which he delivers the rhymes throughout stand in stark contrast to the soft-spoken figure I interviewed. Sidi-O’s rapping style is rife with the pronounced “s,” “th,” and “f” sounds of his lisp as well as exaggerated glottal stops—even by standards of spoken French. The effect makes Sidi-O seem to be literally “spitting” the lyrics, a term that is in fact often used as a synonym for rapping. Rather than distracting from his music, however, the affectations heighten his verbal delivery, creating a degree of intensity that is especially appropriate for the subject of “*Extrait d’Amertume*.”

The most interesting feature of the track, however, is its main loop played on harpsichord—symbol of traditional French music *par excellence*. While the French harpsichord tradition stretches back to the sixteenth century, today it is embodied in the singular figure of baroque composer François Couperin. The instrument’s special association with France today, however, comes as the result of an early twentieth-century revival movement centered around a patriotically motivated search for French national musical roots. Focused in Paris and associated with a host of French composers including Vincent d’Indy and Francis Poulenc as well as the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, the revival articulated a lost sense of the grandeur and elegance of the French monarchy during a time when neoclassicism was becoming a popular aesthetic ideal. Harry Haskell notes this search for French musical roots in his classic study, *The Early Music Revival*:

Essentially a reaffirmation of traditional Gallic virtues, fortified by a strong admixture of nationalistic fervor, Neoclassicism quickly took root in the France of d’Indy, Boulanger, Landowska and the anti-Romantic composers known as ‘Les Six.’... The harpsichord, intrinsically suited to counterpoint and sharply-etched rhythms, was

the Neoclassical instrument *par excellence*.²⁵

While he may not be concerned with this history, per se, it is clear that Sido-O is employing the courtly formality of the harpsichord as a foil for his bitter indictment of French society. The targets of his indignation include a long list of hypocrites, liars, bureaucrats, and most notably, the mindless “bourgeois-ness” [*bourgeoisité*] of the wealthy. Together with an almost comic tuba-sample bass line, the harpsichord motive builds into a satirical but scathing representation of traditional Frenchness. By contrasting such musical formality with outraged lyrics about governmental hypocrisy and corruption, Sidi-O also embodies the name of his record label *Capitale Sale*. Indeed, the name Dirty Capital and its logo featuring two giant housing projects, functions not only as a signifier of authentically urban grit, but communicates Sidi-O’s indictment of the capital city and its government that is perceived to be unresponsive and degraded.

As I walked around Place de la Bastille, on my way home from the studio, I noticed a Sidi-O sticker on one of the street lamps outside of a FNAC store. There were hundreds of music advertisements affixed to the signs and walls around the large music retailer, and it appeared that *Capitale Sale* had done their promotional work. In a randomly fortuitous, but nonetheless poignant, example of the confluence of hip hop and Americanization in Paris, I also came across two posters affixed to another Place de la Bastille street light [Fig. 5].

²⁵ Harry Haskell, *The Early Music Revival: A History*, (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1988), 79. See also Jane F. Fulcher, *French Cultural Politics & Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).



Fig. 5 – Left: Overlapping Posters on a Place de la Bastille street light. Right: Detail of cover art for the *Ecoute la Rue Marianne* hip hop compilation album.

The first placard that caught my eye was an Uncle Sam figure pointing to the viewer with the classic tag line: “I Want You.” On further inspection, the face of the symbol of U.S. patriotism par excellence was that of Sarkozy. After seeing the poster at the Bastille, I began to notice it elsewhere on Parisian street corners—a caricature of the French Interior Minister’s pro-American leanings that was designed to elicit fears about the country’s cultural and economic self-determination and distributed across the city in advance of the National election. Nowhere else, however, was the polemical image plastered over an equally evocative re-imaging of French cultural patrimony. For here, under Uncle Sarko’s mug, was the bust of a doo-ragged and headphoned Marianne—the personification of the French Republic and symbol of French patriotism.

In this formulation, the artwork, title, and musical contents of the politically progressive album—*Ecoute La Rue Marianne* [Listen to the Street Marianne]—work together to implore the French establishment to listen to the diverse postcolonial viewpoints of lower class residents of Parisian ‘hoods and the surrounding *banlieues*. Importantly, the French Socialist Party, which is most likely responsible for the Uncle Sarko image, has had a problematic relationship with French hip hop—a point we will

revisit shortly. Regardless of whether the political operative who posted the anti-Sarkozy material over the hip hop advertisement intended to obscure the mild defamation of French republican values, or to highlight the irony of these two images in counterpoint, the photo captures a moment that is a quite literal snapshot of Parisian cultural politics in the run-up to the 2007 election.

* * *

In closing, I would like to return to Blackara's idea of "*le cauchemar*." Xiao and Mani portray themselves as the nightmare of French society not only because they are anathema to the political Right's fantasy of an ethnically pure nation, but also because they complicate the political Left's dream of a race free society. As the form of cultural politics that these rappers employ indicates, this polarized vision for solving France's "race problem" posits two unacceptable and indeed untenable options: 1.) deport everyone of immigrant origins or 2.) have everyone accept French culture as their own. Notably, both are "race free" dreams. Instead, these self-defined minority rappers choose "to maintain their race identity until... the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility."²⁶

In their music Blackara make it abundantly clear that this possibility has not yet come to pass, but in hip hop music and community they find the most readily available means to work towards that end. The degree of variance between forms of hip hop racialization in France today is indicative of the available space within articulations of minority identity. In the oppositional models of an array of African American cultural forms they locate a politics best suited to their realities and work with those frameworks to make the music their own and to create "New Ethnicities." Furthermore, as the medium of hip hop continues to capture the imaginations of minority youth, the electronic media through which rap music is disseminated will continue to provide them a position of power at the center of debates about the future of France. Perhaps then, *un cauchemar*—a nightmare—is just what is needed in order to wake the nation up from its dreams of a race free France and start working towards the structural equality that would enable such a possibility.

²⁶ Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *The Souls of Black Folk*, 237.